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RUEHSA/AMEMBASSY PRETORIA 1510
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RUEHOS/AMCONSUL LAGOS 0303
RHMFSS/HQ USAFRICOM STUTTGART GE
RHEBAAA/DEPT OF ENERGY WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC
RHMFSS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 002292

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR AF/W, INR/AA

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM NI

SUBJECT: NIGERIA: THREATS TO FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

REF: A. ABUJA 2212

1B. ABUJA 1914

1C. ABUJA 1887

Classified By: Political Counselor Walter Pflaumer for reasons 1.4. (b & d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: During a November 18 dinner with Foreign Minister Ojo Maduekwe, Ambassador shared USG concerns over the recent GON crackdown on the press, which included the closure of one television station and the detention of several journalists, including one American citizen. FonMin replied that he would try to resolve the issues prior to his forthcoming (December) trip to the U.S. Ambassador and RAOff also plan to reach out to the National Security Agency (NSA) about the increase of government infringement on media outlets. We include a recap of recent events below. END SUMMARY

12. (C) During a November 18 dinner with Foreign Minister Ojo Maduekwe, Ambassador expressed USG concerns over recent press freedom issues in Nigeria, including the closure of one television station and the detention of several journalists, including one Amcit. Ambassador told the FonMin that, if similar incidents continue to occur, he would likely hear them raised during his proposed December 1-6 trip to the U.S. The FonMin said he would try to resolve these issues before his travel. Ambassador is scheduled to have a more in-depth meeting with the FonMin on November 30 prior to his departure. Ambassador and RAOff also intend to reach out to the National Security Advisor (NSA) to discuss the recent media clampdown.

13. (C) The following is a recap of recent events:

-- On November 17, the State Security Service (SSS) raided the corporate headquarters of "Leadership" newspaper, and confiscated a computer belonging to Publisher Sam Nda Isaiah. The SSS had previously detained Isaiah on November 14 and 15 and questioned him for eight hours each day. Media reports speculate that the clampdown was in response to an erroneous story about the President's health published by "Leadership" on November 8 (Note: On both November 9 and 10, "Leadership" published a front page retraction and apology for the report, which the paper acknowledges printed false information. On November 10, "This Day" newspaper reported that the President intended to sue "Leadership" for libel. End Note). (Comment: we suspect that the GON's action against "Leadership" may also have been motivated by a Villa desire

to discover the source of a November 7 article, in which the paper listed 20 names that it claimed would be submitted to the National Assembly for confirmation as new Ministers. All 13 ministerial nominees submitted to the Senate on November 18 were on "Leadership's" earlier list. End comment.)

-- On October 29, Jonathan Elendu, owner and publisher of the U.S.-based online news magazine Elendu Reports (www.elendureports.com), was released on bail after nearly two weeks in detention. State Security Services (SSS) arrested Elendu on October 18 upon his arrival from the U.S. at Nnamdi Azikiwe International Airport in Abuja and later transferred him into the custody of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) for further questioning. Although the SSS released Elendu without filing any charges or stating why it detained him, Elendu Reports has run several items recently speculating about President Yar'Adua's ill health. The GON retains his passport and he is not allowed to leave the country.

-- On October 28, the SSS arrested Emmanuel Emeka Asiwe, a U.S. citizen and editor of the online magazine HuhuOnline (www.huhuonline.com), upon his arrival at the Murtala Muhammed International Airport in Lagos. HuhuOnline has also run several items about the President's health in recent days. Asiwe was released on bail on November 4 under condition that he return for additional questioning. The SSS retains Asiwe's U.S. passport and has forbidden him to leave the country until the investigation is concluded.

-- On September 17, the National Broadcasting Commission

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(NBC) announced the suspension of operations and revocation of license for Channels TV following its September 16 closure by the SSS. Federal agents, led by Minister of Information John Odey, shut down Channels TV in Lagos and Abuja for broadcasting a "false news story" about the health of President Yar'Adua. Five staff members -- Deputy Editor-in-Chief John Ndukauba, Controller of News Ambrose Okoh, General Manager Steve Judo, Regional Editor Bashiru Adigun, and Station Manager Shola Olaiya -- were detained for three days. On September 19, NBC allowed Channels TV to resume broadcasting and confirmed the release of all Channels staff without charges.

¶4. (C) COMMENT: Although GON interference with the press is nothing new, the high-profile and frequency of recent events has garnered international attention. The fact that all those detained or harassed have recently reported on President Yar'Adua's health strengthens the overall impression of GON sensitivity on this issue. Despite his promise of promoting the rule of law, President Yar'Adua has yet to make a statement denouncing these recent incidents restricting freedom of the press, a right included in the Nigerian constitution. END COMMENT.

¶5. (U) This cable coordinated with Consulate Lagos.
Sanders